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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003765

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/I AND NEA/IR  
NSC STAFF FOR OLLIVANT

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: SALAH AD-DIN RESIDENTS WORRIED ABOUT PERCEIVED  
IRANIAN INTERFERENCE

REF: A. BAGHDAD 3456  
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 3418

Classified By: Minister-Counselor Michael Corbin for reason 1.4 (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary: Judges and community activists in the mostly Sunni province of Salah ad-Din expressed concern about Iranian meddling in Iraq during a visit by Iran Watcher to the province Nov. 22-25, but struggled to point to specific instances of Iranian influence aside from Iranian products filling local store shelves. Likewise MND-N intelligence officers noted that tribes along the Iran-Iraq border in Diyala province are smuggling Iranian weapons into Iraq, but had no solid evidence of complicity by the government of Iran in weapons smuggling or other support to Sunni extremists in Salah ad-Din. In Samarra, home of the Golden Mosque (a major Shia shrine) and focus of Iranian interest in the province, PRT Salah ad-Din is working with UNESCO and UNDP on a development strategy to broaden the base of cultural and religious tourism in the city while promoting economic development for its (mostly Sunni) citizens. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Embassy's Iran Watcher visited Salah ad-Din province Nov. 22-25 for meetings with community leaders and consultations with PRT Salah ad-Din and MND-N on Iranian influence in the province. Birthplace of Saddam Hussein, Salah ad-Din is overwhelmingly Sunni and tribal. Many of its residents are deeply suspicious of real - or perceived - Iranian interference in internal Iraqi affairs. They speak of "Persian" influence, conflating their fears of Iran with their unease at their own Iraqi Shia neighbors. The views reported below are typical of what the PRT hears regularly. The provincial capital, Tikrit, is a long-standing rival of the commercial capital of Samarra, home of the Golden Mosque, which many Shia believe is where the 12th and final Imam will return as the Mahdi. Sunni extremists attacked the mosque in 2006 and 2007; Iranian officials pledged to assist in rebuilding and recently made two high-level visits without notifying local officials in advance (reftels).

[1](#)3. (C) Faisal Ibrahim Ali, chief judge of the Salah ad-Din Major Crimes Court (protect throughout), said in a meeting that the national government in Baghdad is "facilitating and accepting foreign intruders." The problem is not Iranians, but Iraqis representing Iranian interests, he said, soliciting the agreement of two other Salah ad-Din judges in the meeting. Faisal noted that he had watched the debate in the Council of Representatives (CoR) on the US-Iraq Security Agreement. He could follow the debate even with the sound off, he said, because he believed that members of the CoR dressed in suits and ties were truly representing Iraqi interests while those without ties, those with big beards, and those with religious turbans were "talking in the tongue of another country." Faisal claimed to have information about Iranian interference in Salah ad-Din, but said he was

not authorized to discuss it.

¶4. (S/NF) Likewise, community activist and longtime USG contact Ra'id Khutab (protect throughout) said that residents of the province believe Iran is manipulating the GoI. Ra'id noted the penetration of Iranian goods in local markets and claimed that Iran is providing direct support to al-Qaida and other Sunni extremists. Pressed for evidence of such support, he repeated third-hand stories with little factual basis. MNF-I intelligence officers also have no solid indication of support by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Qindication of support by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) or other arms of the Iranian government for Sunni extremists in Salah ad-Din, although they noted reports of tribes situated on both sides of the border between Iran and Diyala province that traditionally smuggle Iranian weapons into Iraq for sale to all.

¶5. (SBU) A PRT survey of consumer goods and produce in local markets found products from Iran as well as Syria, Turkey, and elsewhere, consistent with national trends indicating that imports are dominating Iraqi markets as the Iraqi economy struggles to recover.

¶6. (SBU) Samarra is the one location in the province where Iranian officials are publicly attempting to increase their influence through offering assistance in the reconstruction and redevelopment of the Golden Mosque. However, the Iraqi government has rejected Iranian assistance and has agreed to work with UNESCO on rebuilding the shrine, and the PRT satellite office in Samarra is facilitating that process, along with supporting a plan to promote broadly based economic development throughout the city and rehabilitation

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of other historic sites to interest a wide range of tourists.

PRT notes that local merchants welcome Iranian tourism dollars but reject Iranian political interference in the city.

¶7. (C) Comment: Salah ad-Din residents' profound suspicions of Iran will likely prevent any significant Iranian meddling in local affairs and would greatly complicate any Iranian attempt to assist local extremists. However, their worries about Iranian influence at the national level will also complicate their relations with the national government, even as the provincial and national officials make increasing efforts to work together.

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